

Take Care

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Do not circulate!

Abstract: In this rejoinder, I elaborate on the uncomfortable and foundational call of “Making a Home of the Society for Music Theory, Inc.”: the necessity of abolition as at once the destruction of our colonial/capitalist worlding and the building of a life-affirming world otherwise. Bringing to the fore a couple of backgrounds to my writing—early career transience and building community with unhoused residents of Norman, Oklahoma—I clarify that my call is not for inclusion (and enclosure) within this colonial/capitalist worlding, but our collective liberation from it. Ultimately, I hope this response might inspire readers to build life-affirming, abolitionist worlds wherever they find themselves.

Keywords: abolish, caretake, deprofessionalize, liberate, organize, steal

On August 1, 2021, I learned that *Music Theory Spectrum* had accepted “Making a Home of the Society for Music Theory, Inc.” for publication.¹ I was sitting at a newly acquired, second-hand table in an otherwise empty house in Norman, Oklahoma. About a week earlier, my partner Vivian and I had moved to Norman from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where we had resided for just under eleven months. As I mentioned in the article’s acknowledgements, I had written and discussed the first drafts of “Making a Home” over the summer of 2020 while in limbo between Charlottesville, Virginia—where we also resided for about eleven months—and Saskatoon. Before Charlottesville, we lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was there for eight years, my partner for seven, as we pursued our Ph.D.s. Chasing gigs around the continent after grad school was not how we wanted to live. But it is the life forced upon many recent graduates pursuing a career in the academy. And upon arrival in Norman, Vivian had yet another one-year gig, so we were already back on the job market, hoping that maybe this year we might find an

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¹Lett (2023).

institution that valued one of us enough to offer a long-term contract. Failing that, we weren't sure what we would do. Perhaps we would refuse further academic precarity, move somewhere we wanted to live, and start building a life outside of the academy. But moving on is hard after having spent over a decade working towards a goal. So maybe we would hold on to this cruel optimism for another year and prolong our transience.² With the news of the article's acceptance, I was happy that something in our lives had found a home. I also hoped this news might portend the same for us: perhaps we too might soon find a place to call home.

Exactly one year later, I received the colloquy responses to my article. I was sitting on the couch, hunched over our coffee table in the same house in Norman. Earlier that year, Vivian won a longer-term contract at the University of Oklahoma, so for the first time in several years, our summer did not include a cross-country move with our cat in the back seat and a small portion of our things crammed into the trunk. Our car, however, logs more miles than ever. In February 2022, I began spending my days driving homeless residents around Norman, often with all of their belongings fitting easily in the trunk and, on occasion, a dog or two in the back seat. It is somewhat of a happenstance that homelessness (construed analogously to "selflessness") was a theme of "Making a Home," and that I currently spend my life working with homeless folks (construed in the sense of people who do not have housing), but both projects emerged from abolitionist study and organizing. Indeed, some of the themes I feel compelled to address in the responses to "Making a Home" are issues I grapple with in my current work offering rides to, and building a community of care with, unhoused people in town. In responding here, then, I elaborate on aspects of this work that is, for me, currently closer to home than the life of the professional academic. In so writing, I offer a comradely, if oblique, response to both Clifton Boyd (who offers us a chance to reflect, at a distance, on our institutional home through the study of another) and Catrina S. Kim (who, thinking with Sara Ahmed,³ asks us to attend to the backgrounds that sustain and animate our labor).⁴ This approach might, as it has for readers of earlier drafts, prove discomfoting, especially here in *Spectrum*: this piece transgresses boundaries of the personal and the professional, it does not engage professional music theory on its preferred terms, and it is an explicit call to political action. I hope this piece offers some space to sit with these discomforts, maybe even work through some of them

²On the notion of "cruel optimism," see Berlant (2011).

³Ahmed (2006).

⁴Boyd (2023); Kim (2023). I also engage the preceding responses more directly (though certainly not thoroughly) here in the footnotes.

here or later in conversation with colleagues, friends, perhaps even family.⁵ In the end, I simply hope that “Making a Home” and this response might lead some of you not already engaged in abolitionist struggle to join those of us who are in building the life-affirming world we urgently need.

While I was channeling my abolitionist energies by writing “Making a Home” at various tables around the continent during and in the wake of the George Floyd Rebellion, people I did not yet know—under the banners of the Norman Collective for Racial Justice, Red Dirt Collective, and the Social Injustice League of Norman—were making abolitionist demands of the City of Norman. In June 2020, their organizing led the City Council to decrease a planned increase to the police budget and reappropriate that money to fund community programs.⁶ Continuing to organize over the following year, these same groups proposed developing a non-police mental health crisis response team to the City, and in June 2021 the City allocated \$500,000 for the program.⁷ After arriving in town, I started working with these organizers to create the institution that would receive these funds. Upon learning that the State of Oklahoma planned on creating its own mental health crisis response team, the City decided to use the money to fund something else: a free, on-demand transportation service for homeless residents. A number of the same activists were already in community with people living in encampments around the City, so we shifted our organizational

⁵I am writing in the wake of and inspired by Project Spectrum’s 2022 preconference, whose theme was “In Discomfort.” Regarding this theme, the organizers—Anna B. Gatlula, Hyeonjin Park, Gerry Lopez, Carlo Aguilar González, Sinem Eylem Arslan, Renata Yazzie, Brian Veasna Sengdala, Hanisha Kulothparan—write, “To sit and contend with our discomfort as settlers and members of imperial institutions also forces our disciplines to contend with the fact that the current state of our environments to which we belong are not, of themselves, sites of liberation. Knowing that we are ‘In Discomfort,’ however, also means we know that we can feel and maybe have felt otherwise” (Project Spectrum [n.d.]). A discomfort I have been sitting with since learning of the plan for this colloquy is that a piece by me, a white junior scholar, has been lent this space here within an SMT publication when a piece by Philip A. Ewell (2020), a Black senior scholar, found no such hospitality within another journal of the Society. With this in mind, I try to make good use of this space by advocating and performing abolitionist praxis—a praxis I learned through scholars and activists in the Black radical tradition.

⁶Norman City Council Meeting Minutes, June 16, 2020.

⁷Norman City Council Meeting Minutes, June 8, 2021.

focus, incorporated Norman Care-A-Vans, drafted bylaws,⁸ applied for non-profit status, and in early 2022 started operations in hopes of soon receiving that funding.⁹

In April 2022, the City put out a Request for Proposals for the service we offer. We submitted our proposal in early May and then in June the City rejected our proposal and awarded the contract to no one. With the City's decision not to fund our operations, we have (so far) failed in our initial mission: to redirect the City's money towards social services premised on caring for instead of incarcerating people. But on the plus side, without that funding's contractual stipulations, we are free to operate according to our values. Indeed, most of our non-profit community partners, in order to safeguard their more ample funding, cannot do the kinds of things we are happy to do: organize a sit-in or loudly protest encampment destruction.¹⁰ This is not to say that our community partners fail to act. But they are limited in their public actions by their inclusion within the system and have to "play nice" where we do not.

The downside of not being included is that we struggle every day to keep our service running. For all of the love we get from our community (and we love this love), we have very little money. We are trying to change that by building up our donor base and seeking out foundation grants. But we are also cognizant of the fact that, as the title of a classic text on the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC) reminds us, *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*.¹¹ So here we are dwelling within the NPIC, seeking to raise funds as we work to build a world where folks actually have the time and resources to prioritize caretaking their relations: a world where the philanthropic capitalists, who at once sustain the NPIC and create the very impoverishing conditions they say they want to "solve," *cannot exist*. To be included enough to sustain our practice and propagandize our vision, but not so much so that we become enclosed by its logics and lose our ability or willingness to fight back against this world's diffusion of terror: this is our constant struggle.

⁸For our bylaws, we used the model of the worker self-directed non-profit (Sustainable Economies Law Center [n.d.]). This model gives primary governing power to the workers rather than the Board of Directors or Executive Director. While this model might not work well for the SMT, I agree with Manabe's proposal that we should collectivize the power currently concentrated in SMT's Presidency (2023).

⁹With the permission of my friends with whom I am building and operating Norman Care-A-Vans, I use "we" throughout in reference to the collective nature of our work. This "we" includes Alan Hatcher, Russell Rice, and Hannah Smith.

¹⁰In conversation with Gopinath (2023), I wonder if the SMT, in coalition with other academic societies, might leverage its national/international scope to help organize protests of academic working conditions demanding the "impossible": smaller course loads, equal pay (or equity pay), more tenure streams, smaller class sizes, and benefits for all.

¹¹INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2017).

When I first read through the responses to “Making a Home,” one of the general themes I noticed was that a number of people seemed to read, or chose to engage the article, as a call for inclusion, diversity, and making the SMT more welcoming.¹² What I sense might be underplayed in such engagements is that the ultimate call of “Making a Home” is not for a more inclusive Society. Rather the article calls for organizing towards *liberation* from these very institutions that, as others have demonstrated, include in order to enclose, extract from, and destroy life otherwise.¹³ I wonder, then, if it might prove more generative to attend to the piece as grappling with the potentials and pitfalls of calls for inclusion: the tension between being included and being enclosed by this world’s colonial/capitalist institutions, including the SMT.¹⁴ Indeed, institutional initiatives for diversity and inclusion do not seek to liberate: they operate to enclose and thereby foreclose the unruly, radical, otherwise potentials of our dream to the necessities of navigating the reasonable, limited, given possibilities of the busted world in which they wish to include us.

Though “Making a Home” is not, in the end, a call for diversity, equity, and inclusion, I should note that I am not against such institutional initiatives. I just see them, like others organizing in the academy, as professed values around which we may organize in the service of liberation.¹⁵ My stance, however, is that these institutions, including the SMT, cannot be reformed so as to foster liberation; they must be abolished. But at the same time, here we are, folded together within these institutions. Given this ontological condition—our complicity¹⁶—I hope we might be accomplices in leveraging these professed values to steal whatever paltry resources we get through being included in order to continue building and nourishing the otherwise, abolitionist worlds where we take care of one another outside of the extractive logics foisted upon us all by one overrepresented mode of being human.

¹²Judith Lochhead, for instance, reads “Making a Home” as adding to the “growing and long-standing calls ... to diversify the demographics of [the SMT]” (2023, forthcoming), and Leigh VanHandel writes that the piece “calls for structural changes that allow more scholars to see themselves reflected in the society” (2023, forthcoming).

¹³See, for instance, James (2016), Coulthard (2014), and Ferguson (2012). In considering “inclusion as enclosure,” I am thinking with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014), who themselves were thinking with Troy Richardson (2011). Nancy Yunhwa Rao’s response (2023) attends to this dynamic in noting how inclusion of more diverse musical works often encloses them within the field’s given epistemological frames. By opening our field to divergent modes of knowing, being, and relating, as Rao advocates, we open fugitive potentials.

¹⁴I offer this as an alternative to McCreless’s reading which construes the piece as “turn[ing] on the binary opposition inclusion/exclusion” (2023, forthcoming).

¹⁵As Catrina Kim writes elsewhere, “Despite the conflict between abolitionist, community-first, collective organizing and the goals of the capitalist university, it is worth noting that, in many cases, the contradictions of the first-world university make this kind of work easy to justify” (2021, 41).

¹⁶On this generative construal of “complicity,” see Harney and Moten (2021, 124–26).

Homo oeconomicus pervades the operations of our worlding: to survive, we are forced to aspire to it—to become a “productive member of society.”¹⁷ Working with unhoused folks, we see the devastating effects of the image every day, over and over. To keep your bed at the Salvation Army for more than fifteen days, you must get a job. At City Council meetings we hear calls that strings be attached to homeless services so that people will “better themselves” and become self-sufficient. I also hear this image leveraged within the unhoused community: some insist that they are more deserving than those other homeless folks because they are trying to get a job. As my colleagues and I go about our work with Norman Care-A-Vans, we too have to keep the image at bay in our own thinking and practice as we get stressed out and struggle to keep up with all the various requests from our friends. We have to remind ourselves: everyone deserves our care, support, and services, no strings attached, no matter what. According to our colonial/capitalist worlding, however, we are absolutely wrong: those institutions propagandizing *homo oeconomicus* insist that those who do not fit this image, for whatever reason, deserve to die.

Sometimes when friends get into my car, there is nowhere for them to go. They have exhausted all resources available to them. Everyone has done all they can. But here they are in my car, struggling simply to survive another day in this world—a world that insists on inflicting their premature death. Where do you drive someone when they are slowly dying on the streets, but our world will not offer people the help they need? Reflecting on this predicament our world chooses to make for him, one of our friends said to me as I drove him to nowhere: “It feels like I’m at war.” Though he articulated this as an analogy, my immediate thought was to affirm this not as an analogy but as an analysis of his condition: *This is war*.¹⁸

Thinking along these lines, I was interested in how some read aspects of “Making a Home” as metaphorical as opposed to literal—particularly my language of coloniality. The basis of this metaphorical reading seems to be that by using this language, I am comparing the matter at hand to the founding events of settler colonization.¹⁹

¹⁷On *homo oeconomicus*, see Wynter and McKittrick (2015) and Douglas and Ney (1998). Thinking with Kathleen Stewart (2010), among others, I use “worlding” to underscore the dynamic, in-process nature of any given “world.”

¹⁸As I was putting the finishing touches on this article, I learned that the friend I quoted above had passed. In honor of him—as well as those who have already passed and those who, tragically and unnecessarily, will pass in the future—I restate the analysis: *This is war*.

¹⁹McCreless (2023) and Gopinath (2023), in particular, read my analysis in the “Building” section as metaphorically mapping pedagogues onto Natives and professionals onto settlers.

Though I clearly afforded this reading, I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify: I do not intend the story I tell pitting the professionals against the pedagogues as a metaphorical retelling of the historical events of colonization, but as an analysis of the enduring modes of relating—the structures—that constitute the world in which we currently dwell. Looking back on the article, I could have made this clearer. Perhaps a better way to cast my story would have been to clarify that it is one of settlers jockeying for the colonial loot—that loot being jobs propagating certain musical, epistemological, and institutional values.²⁰ Do I use some language metaphorically? Yes, for sure.²¹ But is this analysis metaphorical? Not at all. We literally, through our work in the SMT, enact the diffusion of terror that sustains this colonial worlding.²² I wish to contest, then, a “move to innocence” I sense could emerge through a certain kind of metaphorical reading: the notion that our current institutions are *not as bad* as they used to be.²³ I disagree. This world’s colonial logics are neither abating nor are they in the process of liquidation.²⁴ Rather, they continue to transmute, if not intensify.

²⁰See, for instance, Englert (2020). That is, I agree with Gopinath that the “professional music theorist appeared within an already extant colonial matrix” (2023, forthcoming). Again, I am grateful for the chance to clarify because I do not believe that the music theory pedagogue is at all exemplary of “the ‘service orientation’ that ostensibly resists colonialist and capitalist logics and who is a kind of ideal for the future of music theory” (Gopinath [2023]). Indeed, as Kim (2023) argues, music theory pedagogy continues to serve whiteness, which is part and parcel of the very colonial and capitalist projects I write to organize against.

²¹“Metaphors,” as Dylan Robinson writes, “can help us work around the zero-sum reactionary response (itself a structure of white supremacy) often given to proposals for structural change that involve more than mere inclusion. ... [M]etaphor offers the possibility to imagine structural change as a practice of renewal” (Cunningham et al. [2020]). While metaphor can, in this way, offer a generative opening to radical change, as Vivian Luong argues in her studies of music-theoretical engagements with “agency” (forthcoming) and “bodies” (2022b), viewing something as “metaphorical” can also function to enclose our thinking within an animacy hierarchy that reinscribes our colonial worlding. The issue then is how one orients to metaphor. Is the poetic function of metaphor construed expansively as a mode of poesis—an opening to imagining and building worlds otherwise? On this approach, see Saidiya Hartman’s comments in Hartman et al. (2020). Or is any given metaphor construed as “just” or “merely” that—a comparison for the critique of the colonial gaze?

²²Describing and performing the toll of life within our disciplinary home, for instance, Vivian Luong writes, “I am flattened by the constant deferral of my anger, my grief, my fear of violent retaliation—all of which has only been made ever more mundane-yet-exceptional in the past two years of the pandemic. I feel unrooted, de-situated, displaced from institution to institution in an increasingly contingent labor market. How and with whom can I grieve when I’m not sure where I will be and if I will survive?” (2022a). Our colonial institutions, of course, prefer to keep these realities hidden, placed elsewhere, beyond our immediate gaze—to do otherwise, as Robyn Maynard notes of her walking tour of Toronto where “some of the contemporary architects of the warfare against human and non-human life” draw up their plans, would be “uncivilized” (Maynard and Simpson [2022, 11–12]).

²³Tuck and Yang (2012); Mawhinney (1998).

²⁴With the word “liquidation” I nod to Lochhead’s use of the term in her response (2023). I am in favor, like Lochhead, of liquidating (in the sense of abolishing) “systems that operationalize oppressions” (2023, forthcoming). Where we disagree, I believe, has to do with whether “directing [our] research to topics that have both social and intellectual ramifications now” will necessarily do this work (Lochhead [2023, forthcoming]). I wonder, that is, if such work (including my own) affords a transmutation and reconfiguration of our oppressive systems instead of their abolition.

On November 7, 2022, Vivian and I drove the first leg of our road trip from Norman to New Orleans, Louisiana, to attend the joint meeting of the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the SMT. We were still preparing for the meeting while on the road. So as I drove, Vivian read aloud one of the readings assigned for the seminar portion of Project Spectrum’s pre-conference symposium, “In Discomfort”: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses.”²⁵ I had first read the piece in Charlottesville in 2019, and quoted it in “Making a Home.” Returning to it, together with Vivian, was a joy. We excitedly interrupted the text to digest things together. We laughed raucously at lines that are so perfectly witty at articulating an intense pessimism about this world in which we dwell, while at the same time offering hope in abolitionist worlds. While I had remembered their call to a criminal relationship with the university—stealing, as I say above, what we can through our inclusion²⁶—what I had forgotten and what hit closest to home for me in this experience of this piece was their discussion of the “professional.”

I have been stubbornly adamant that we at Norman Care-A-Vans not uphold any pretense to being “professionals”—that we remain non-, anti-, or even un-professional in our activities. By this, I do not mean that we should lack knowledge of the systems we work in or that we should do what we do poorly, without care and intention. So why am I so adamant we avoid professionalizing? Refusing the more common meaning of the word, Moten and Harney hit the nail on the head: professionalization, they argue, “is the privatization of the social individual through negligence.”²⁷ More so than being trained to perform a particular job well, professionals are trained to refer/defer anything beyond their scope of practice to other professionals.²⁸ The project of professionalization in this sense is “nothing less than to convert the social individual” into an asocial, privatized one—someone who tends only to select relations and refuses responsibility for effects beyond their professional scope.²⁹ For Moten and Harney “professional,” then, is less a description of one’s demonstrated capacity to do a job than it is an attitude towards life: to narrowly engage the world and neglect anything outside the scope they have

²⁵Moten and Harney (2004).

²⁶The first of their seven theses reads: “The Only Possible Relationship to the University Today Is a Criminal One” (Moten and Harney [2004, 101]).

²⁷Moten and Harney (2004, 108).

²⁸As Leigh VanHandel (2023) argues, our graduate degree programs often reflect an outdated scope of practice. I wonder if graduate programs might have fewer particular course requirements—perhaps just a course introducing the field and a course on pedagogy.

²⁹Moten and Harney (2004, 111).

been trained to engage. With Moten and Harney, it is precisely war against this privatizing, asocial, professionalizing society to which abolitionists are committed.³⁰ So to the professional's asocial logic of referring/deferring, we say: Fuck this; let us deprofessionalize and build a world where we collectively take care where we are, how we are able, without abdicating responsibility.

In conversation about an earlier draft of this piece, Vivian wondered if I might conclude by bringing back the theme of “home” from the opening. So I started to think about why it is that I still struggle to think of Norman in this way. Perhaps it's because we have only been here a little over a year. Perhaps it's because we are still, like many academics, perpetually on the job market: residing here but imagining life elsewhere. But whenever Vivian and I walk downtown, we see friendly faces that call out to us by name. In some ways, we have more community here than anywhere else we have lived. So I try to remind myself that home—including an academic home like the SMT—is never idyllic: it is at once a site of repose and labor, care and violation, recreation and abuse. It's messy. And I try to remind myself to value the work of homemaking wherever we are by fostering collective, reparative, and life-affirming practices in community. So even though Norman doesn't feel like home yet, I suppose that I have been making a home here by building a community of love and care on the way to our friends' various destinations—lending an ear to stories, crying and laughing together, ranting about cops, complaining about how fucked-up everything is, and belting out tunes together along with the radio.³¹ Making this space for simply caring for each other is incredibly hard work. Or, rather, such caretaking is *made to be* hard in this racial hetero-patriarchal capitalist worlding. But caring anyway and building community where we are at—this is the radical side of making a home that we all might do together. So whenever I drop folks off, wherever it is they are going, I seek to proliferate this abolitionist ethos by simply saying: Take care.

³⁰Moten and Harney describe the criminal, abolitionist “commitment to war” as “not mere negligence or careless destruction but a commitment against the idea of society itself, that is, against what Foucault called the Conquest, the unspoken war that founded, and with the force of law, refounds society” (2004, 113). On the “Conquest” see Foucault (2003).

³¹The ostensible horizon of our driving is that we eventually drop our friends off at their own housing. Getting an unhoused person housed in this world, however, is not idyllic at all: it usually means entering into a predatory relationship with a slumlord. As abolitionists, our ultimate goal is not our friends' subsidized or unsubsidized inclusion in this market, but the building of a world where housing is not a commodity.

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